

Evidence-Based Practices in Special Education

Professional Learning Handout: What the Research Says Works

IDEA requires that special education and related services be based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable (§300.320(a)(4)). This handout summarizes practices with strong evidence bases across academic, behavioral, and inclusive-practice domains, drawn from What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) reviews and meta-analytic research. Use it as a quick reference in PLC discussions, coaching cycles, or new-staff onboarding.

1. Academic Instruction — Strong Evidence

Practice	What It Is	Evidence Base
Explicit, Systematic Instruction	Clear modeling, guided practice, immediate corrective feedback, cumulative review	Multiple WWC-reviewed studies; meta-analyses across reading/math for students with LD
Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM)	Brief, standardized, repeated probes to monitor academic progress	Deno (1985) and decades of replication; NCII-endorsed
Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS)	Structured peer tutoring in reading/math	WWC-rated "positive effects" for reading achievement
Graphic Organizers	Visual tools to structure content relationships before/during/after instruction	Meta-analytic evidence for comprehension and writing outcomes
Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD)	Explicit strategy instruction for writing paired with self-monitoring	Strong WWC and meta-analytic evidence for students with LD

2. Behavioral & Social-Emotional — Strong Evidence

Practice	What It Is	Evidence Base
Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS)	Tiered, school-wide framework of proactive behavior support	Large-scale RCTs (Bradshaw et al.) showing reduced office referrals, improved climate
Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)	Systematic process to identify the function of a behavior before intervening	Decades of applied behavior analysis research; required by IDEA in specific discipline contexts
Check-In/Check-Out (CICO)	Daily structured feedback/mentoring for Tier 2 behavior support	Multiple single-case design studies with strong effect sizes
Social Skills Training (explicit, modeled, practiced)	Direct instruction in specific social skills with practice/feedback	Meta-analytic support, particularly paired with practice opportunities

3. High-Leverage Practices Snapshot

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and CEEDAR Center's 22 High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) organize evidence-based practice into four domains — see the companion HLP Quick Reference Guide for the full list and classroom application examples.

- Collaboration (e.g., collaborating with families, co-teaching)
- Assessment (e.g., using data to guide instructional decisions)
- Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices (e.g., FBA-based interventions, self-regulation instruction)
- Instruction (e.g., explicit instruction, scaffolding, intensive intervention)

4. Practices to Use With Caution or Avoid

Some widely used practices lack strong evidence or have evidence of harm — flag these in coaching conversations.

- Learning styles-matched instruction (visual/auditory/kinesthetic "styles") — not supported by controlled research despite popularity.
- Exclusionary discipline (suspension/seclusion) as a primary behavior strategy — associated with worse outcomes and disproportionate use for students of color and students with disabilities; use only as a last resort with data-informed alternatives in place.
- One-size-fits-all pull-out models applied regardless of individual LRE need.

5. Discussion Prompts for PLC/Team Use

- Which of these practices are we already implementing with fidelity? How do we know (what data)?
- Where is there a mismatch between a student's documented need and the practice currently being used?
- What coaching or resource support would help us implement one practice with greater fidelity this semester?

Evidence Base & Sources

- What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences — practice guides and intervention reports.
- Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) & CEEDAR Center — High-Leverage Practices in Special Education (2017).
- National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) — evidence standards for academic and behavioral interventions.
- Bradshaw, C. P., Mitchell, M. M., & Leaf, P. J. (2010). Examining the effects of schoolwide PBIS. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*.
- 34 CFR §300.320(a)(4) (peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable).

This resource synthesizes federal statute, regulation, and peer-reviewed / technical-assistance-center guidance current as of publication. It is an instructional tool, not legal advice; consult your district's legal counsel and current state regulations for compliance decisions.